



Ambulance Service Delivery:

DISCUSSION PAPER

MLA REVIEW
MAY 2001

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
ALBERTA

HARVEY CENAIKO, M.L.A.
CALGARY BUFFALO
CHAIR, AMBULANCE ADVISORY AND APPEAL BOARD

May 10, 2001

Dear Stakeholder:

Enclosed is a discussion paper on Ambulance Service Delivery in Alberta. I invite you to provide me with your comments regarding the questions in the paper.

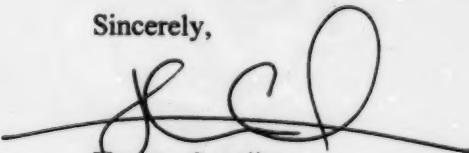
On May 2nd, it was announced that Luke Ouellette, MLA Innisfail-Sylvan Lake, and I have been asked to review ground ambulance services and provide recommendations regarding future governance and delivery of emergency medical services.

We recognize that significant improvements have occurred with Alberta's ground ambulance services following previous reviews. We intend to build on the successes of these reviews. However, while Albertans receive excellent care from ground ambulance services, the system faces challenges in meeting the demands of a growing, aging and increasingly urban population. These challenges place considerable pressure on municipalities, ambulance operators, regional health authorities, attendants and the province to provide Albertans with access to well-coordinated and responsive emergency medical services when they need them.

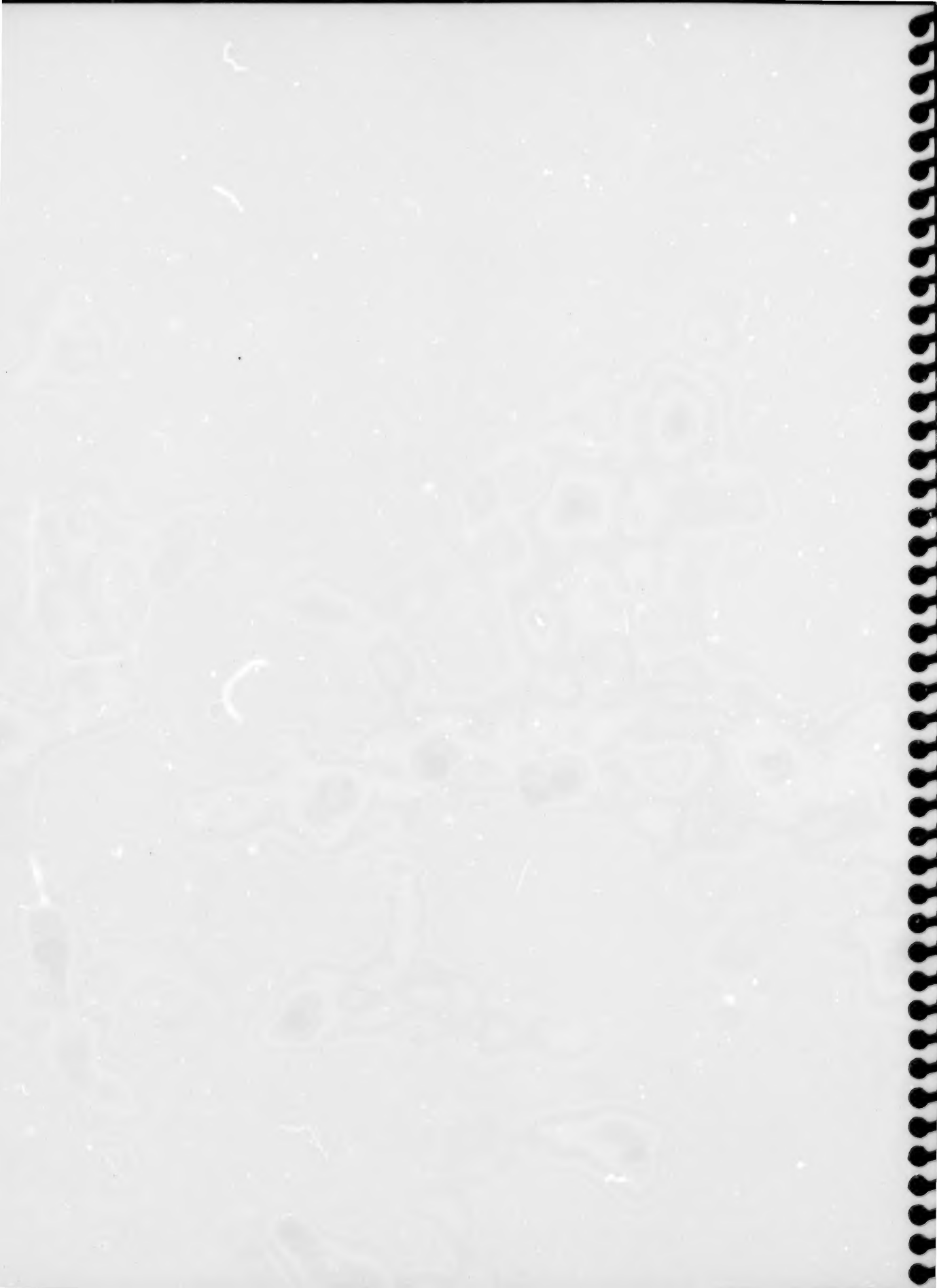
If you wish to participate in this review of ground ambulance services, please provide written comments regarding the issues and questions in this paper. After the written submissions are compiled, we will create opportunities to discuss particular issues with stakeholder representatives prior to development of recommendations. Recommendations regarding the future governance and delivery of emergency medical services will be provided to the Ministers of Health and Wellness, Human Resources and Employment and Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Ouellette and I look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions about this paper or the process, please call (780) 422-9654; toll free 310-0000, then (780) 422-9654.

Sincerely,



Harvey Cenaiko
MLA Calgary Buffalo



Introduction

The delivery of Alberta's ground ambulance services has undergone significant changes over the years. In part, these changes have occurred naturally as the industry evolved to meet the changing needs and expectations of Albertans. Technological advances and enhanced training of ambulance attendants have also increased the level of care provided by ground ambulance operators in the province. Other changes to the system have occurred as a result of implementation of recommendations from several provincial committees that have reviewed the delivery of ground ambulance services.

While Albertans currently receive excellent care from ground ambulance operators, the system continues to face challenges. In order to address these challenges, various stakeholders such as municipalities, regional health authorities (RHAs) and private operators have asked government to review the current issues to ensure our ground ambulance services can meet the future needs of Albertans.

A new MLA Review Team comprised of Calgary Buffalo MLA, Harvey Cenaiko, and Innisfail-Sylvan Lake MLA, Luke Ouellette, will study these issues and make recommendations regarding future governance and delivery of emergency medical services.

Reporting to the Ministers of Health and Wellness, Human Resources and Employment, and Municipal Affairs, the MLA Review Team is seeking the input of Albertans on a number of outstanding issues, including:

- *delivery of ground ambulance services;*
- *assessment of existing standards for Emergency Medical Services;*
- *effective use of Emergency Medical Service resources;*
- *funding of ground ambulance services; and*
- *designation of Emergency Medical Services as an essential service.*

In order to complete the review of ground ambulance services, Albertans are invited to review this discussion paper and provide written submissions to the MLA Review Team for consideration.

The Issues

Delivery of Ground Ambulance Services

There are 125 licensed ground ambulance operators who have over 400 ambulances located throughout the province. Ambulance operators provide 200,000 ground ambulance trips each year – taking patients from home or an accident scene to hospital, or transferring patients from one care facility to another.

Under the *Municipal Government Act*, municipalities have the authority to establish ambulance services and determine the level of service they provide. To deliver these services, municipalities may establish a municipal ambulance operation, either separately or combined with their fire department, or they may contract with an RHA or a private company to provide ambulance services.

Several innovative governance models for the delivery of ambulance services have been created in the province. For example, a rural and an adjoining urban municipality have formed an ambulance board. A group of municipalities has also formed a municipal commission to guide ground ambulance services within that area. Other municipalities have combined emergency services such as fire, police and ambulance in one facility.

Increasingly, ground ambulance services are seen as an integral component of a comprehensive health system. No longer viewed as transportation to or between health care facilities, ground ambulance services and ambulance attendants serve as the front-line of our health care system and play an important role in the treatment of a patient's medical condition or traumatic injury. The delivery of ground ambulance services also is affected by a number of changes in our population that is growing, ageing and becoming increasingly urban.

As a result, there is considerable pressure on municipalities, RHAs, ambulance operators, attendants and the Province to provide Albertans with access to well-coordinated and responsive ground ambulance services when they need them.

Question:

What is the best governance model for ensuring delivery of effective ground ambulance services?

- **Should municipalities continue to be responsible for the delivery of Emergency Medical Services?**
- **If not, who should be responsible for delivering ambulance services?**

Assessment of Existing Standards for Emergency Medical Services

Levels of service

To ensure Albertans have access to effective ground ambulance services the Province implemented the **Ambulance Services Act** in March 1994. Under this legislation, the Province establishes certain standards for ambulance operators, ambulance attendants, and equipment used in ambulances. There are three levels of service recognized in the **Ambulance Services Act**:

- *Emergency Medical Responder (EMR)*
- *Basic Life Support (BLS)*
- *Advanced Life Support (ALS)*

While the Province requires that the minimum level of ambulance service is that of Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), it is the responsibility of the local municipality to determine if the level of service in their jurisdiction exceeds that level. An increasing percentage of ambulance operators are licensed at either the BLS or ALS level. However, a significant number of the operators licensed at ALS level are located in the larger urban centers and in some rural areas.

Patient access

There are different approaches to the delivery of ground ambulance services across the province. Factors including geography, sparse population, legislation, different governance models, and availability of trained staff present significant challenges in providing an effective and appropriate level of service to Albertans.

Medical direction

Current legislation requires that ambulance attendants work under medical direction; therefore, each ground ambulance operator in the province has a medical director who provides direction regarding the care provided by staff. Medical protocol guidelines for ambulance attendants, developed at a provincial level, are offered as a resource to medical directors. These protocols are not a legislated standard and medical directors adapt the guidelines to local needs. As a result, differences in medical protocols for ambulance attendants exist between jurisdictions.

Communication systems and dispatching

The importance of communications and dispatch systems in ground ambulance services has increased significantly in recent years. For example, the ability to provide on-line medical control and pre-arrival instructions to family members assists in providing appropriate care to patients. Across the province there are different systems currently in use and ground ambulance operators may experience difficulty in coordination across jurisdictions. Communications and dispatch systems can affect the ability of ambulance operators to deliver pre-hospital or inter-facility care.

Question:

What ideas do you have to address issues relating to:

- ***levels of service;***
- ***patient access;***
- ***medical direction;***
- ***communication systems and dispatching?***

Effective Use of Emergency Medical Service Resources

Due to the wide variety of governance models for ground ambulance services, a number of different models are used to maximize the skills and expertise offered by ambulance attendants. For example, in some RHAs ambulance attendants assist hospital staff by treating patients in the emergency room. In other jurisdictions, ambulance attendants are involved in public education initiatives about injury prevention. In those jurisdictions which combine fire and ambulance services, ambulance attendants are actively involved in fire prevention and inspection activities.

Our health system has also evolved and there is more emphasis on community-based, rather than institutional, care. Services such as home care, personal and technical supports, community rehabilitation, assisted living, day programs and respite care are available to a much greater extent than ever before. The changing roles of health-care facilities and an increasing number of requests for inter-facility transfers place additional strain on ambulance operators and staff. Issues also arise related to payment for ambulance services when used in conjunction with these newer approaches to care.

Patients do not always need to be transported using ambulances. In many cases, it is neither practical nor cost-effective to move inter-facility patients by ambulance. Alternative transport mechanisms may be a more appropriate method for transfers. Subject to medical control and direction, some patients could be transported by specialty transport vehicles or other means. This would ensure that ambulance resources remain available for more pressing pre-hospital or inter-facility needs.

Question:

What improvements can be made to existing Emergency Medical Service (EMS) systems to ensure the skills and expertise offered by ambulance attendants as well as other resources are used most effectively?



Funding of Ambulance Services

Municipalities have the authority to establish and determine the level of ambulance services within their jurisdiction. Most municipalities pay a grant to the ambulance operator in their area. Usually, the grant is determined through a per capita levy for every municipal resident that is raised through municipal taxes.

The Province pays for in-patient and emergency out-patient transfers (provided through RHAs), as well as other government assistance programs, such as programs for seniors, widows and low-income Albertans (administered by Alberta Blue Cross). The federal government is responsible for the medical transportation of First Nations persons. Other services are paid through user fees, the majority of which are paid by third party insurance firms.

The cost of one ambulance trip varies depending on the level of service provided, the type of equipment and supplies used, and the distance travelled. The charge to the patient varies considerably across the province depending on the cost of the service, the amount of the municipal grant, and whether or not the patient is insured.

There is no one funding source for ambulance services; the current funding of ambulance services does create issues. For example, some ambulance operators depend heavily on fees for inter-facility transfers to maintain economic viability. Other issues include the ability of ambulance operators to collect unpaid bills from individual users for ambulance services. These funding issues may serve as an obstacle in the delivery of future ambulance services.

Questions:

In future, how should ambulance services be funded?

What criteria should be used to establish the Minister's rate for ground ambulance services? Should ambulance operators be allowed to charge additional fees to clients of government-sponsored programs, e.g., seniors?

Should there be a standard user fee for ground ambulance services for all Albertans?



Designation of Emergency Medical Services as an Essential Service

Maintaining uninterrupted ground ambulance service is vital to the safety and well being of all Albertans. The MLA Review Team will explore options to ensure that workplace disruptions do not jeopardize public safety.

Currently, the **Alberta Labour Relations Code** has special provisions to ensure that disputes in certain essential service areas are resolved without strike or lockout. These provisions apply to:

- *firefighters and their employers; and*
- *employers and employees of approved hospitals (as defined by the **Hospitals Act**).*

At present, only EMS services operated out of an approved hospital or integrated with fire services are subject to these provisions.

There are a number of options available to the government to make sure workplace disputes do not compromise public health or safety. Some options include:

- Amend the **Alberta Labour Relations Code** to include EMS employers and their employees to the list of those who are subject to arbitration as a dispute resolution process, rather than strike or lockout.
- Create new, specialized legislation applying only to EMS employers and their employees. (Similar to the **Police Officers' Collective Bargaining Act**, the legislation would contain specific provisions for the resolution of disputes without strike or lockout.)

Question:

What approach should be adopted to ensure that EMS disputes are resolved without workplace disruptions?

Consultation Process

The MLA Review Team invites stakeholders to provide written submissions in response to the questions posed in this discussion paper. The deadline for written submissions is June 15, 2001. After the written submissions are compiled, the Review Team will create opportunities to discuss particular issues with stakeholder representatives prior to development of recommendations.

When the consultation process is complete, the MLA Review Team will provide recommendations regarding the future governance and delivery of emergency medical services to the Ministers of Health and Wellness, Human Resources and Employment, and Municipal Affairs.

Please send your written submission by June 15, 2001 to:

*MLA Review of Ambulance Service Delivery
c/o Alberta Health and Wellness
Emergency Health Services
11 floor, 10025 Jasper Avenue
P.O. Box 1360 STN Main
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 2N3*



Questions Summary

1.) What is the best governance model for ensuring delivery of effective ground ambulance services?

- Should municipalities continue to be responsible for the delivery of Emergency Medical Services?
- If not, who should be responsible for delivering ambulance services?

2.) What ideas do you have to address issues relating to:

- levels of service;
- patient access;
- medical direction;
- communication systems and dispatching?

3.) What improvements can be made to existing Emergency Medical Service (EMS) systems to ensure the skills and expertise offered by ambulance attendants as well as other resources are used most effectively?

4.) In the future, how should ambulance services be funded?

What criteria should be used to establish the Minister's rate for ground ambulance services? Should ambulance operators be allowed to charge additional fees to clients of government-sponsored programs, e.g., seniors?

Should there be a standard user fee for ground ambulance services for all Albertans?

5.) What approach should be adopted to ensure that EMS disputes are resolved without workplace disruptions?

For more information please contact:

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Workplace Relations and Facilitation
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Fax: (780) 422-0014
Web site: www.gov.ab.ca/hre/